

House Bill 5965, An Act Establishing Thomas Paine Day
Government Administration and Elections Committee
March 23, 2009

My name is John Wilhelm. I reside at 74 Westford Avenue, Stafford Springs, Connecticut. I am submitting this written testimony in support of House Bill 5965, An Act Establishing Thomas Paine Day. I respectfully request that the Government Administration and Elections Committee and, ultimately, the General Assembly, approve the bill.

House Bill 5965 would require the Governor to proclaim January 29th of each year to be Thomas Paine Day to honor Thomas Paine for “his instrumental role in the cause of independence leading to the American Revolution.” It also requires suitable exercises to be held in the State Capitol and elsewhere in observance of the day. The bill would cost a minimal amount and I believe the state would benefit greatly if the legislature approved it.

I would like to commend the sponsor of the legislation, Rep. Carlo Leone of Stamford, and thank the committee for considering the concept in the bill. Although it may not be the most critical issue the legislature will consider this year, particularly in the current budget climate confronting the state, it is, however, important and could have far-reaching implications, particularly in understanding the ideals upon which our nation was founded and for educating the next generation of schoolchildren.

Thomas Paine is perhaps best known as the author of the pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in 1776, which advocated for colonial America’s independence from Great Britain. His opening lines from the “American Crises” have been repeated often through the course of American history: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have the consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.” These words helped lift the spirits of the Continental Army in some of their darkest days, December 1776, right before General Washington attacked the Hessians at Trenton, NJ. His words are widely credited with shifting public opinion in favor of independence in 1776. At the beginning of that year, most people in the 13 colonies still thought of themselves as English, and favored a continuing connection to England. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, is still regarded as one of the best arguments for American Independence. It sold 100,000 copies, enough to reach one in five American households. *Common Sense* inspired the colonists to believe America was strong enough to survive on its own, create a better future for its people, and set an example for the world.

But I am enthusiastic for this bill not only because Thomas Paine was such a notable patriot, but also because I believe the State of Connecticut currently does far too little to recognize and celebrate its own significant contributions to the American Revolution, and the creation of the United States in its aftermath. In Massachusetts, events at Bunker

(Breeds) hill occur annually, the shot that was heard around the world is reenacted on the Lexington Green, as is the encounter at North Bridge between colonists and British soldiers. As one of the 13 original Colonies, we here in Connecticut have a rich heritage to be proud of, one which we should make sure is passed on to our children. But today many of our citizens drive past 18th century structures and historical towns totally unaware of the significance of what they are experiencing. They remain oblivious and disconnected from the history that surrounds them, which was part of and witness to the birth of Liberty and the United States as a nation. These are towns and structures where Washington, Lafayette, our own General Putnam, and others passed through or stayed at during the American Revolution. Towns such as Norwalk, Danbury, and New London were attacked and burned by the British. From northeastern Connecticut, men left their plows in the fields and walked the entire distance to Boston to defend Bunker (Breeds) Hill. Regiments from Connecticut that joined the Continental Line were generally equipped better than average thanks to the prosperity of the State. The 6th Connecticut distinguished itself by crossing the Long Island Sound and successfully attacking the British at Sag Harbor. Other regiments from Connecticut participated in major battles under the command of General Washington.

Although not from Connecticut, Thomas Paine is a patriot and defender of Liberty who deserves recognition. By setting aside a day in his honor, we would also be encouraging the residents of Connecticut to focus their attention more broadly on the important role our own state played in the American Revolution. His most important works, *Common Sense* and the *Rights of Man* are classics of political thought that no American should be unacquainted with. Yet while I regard the educational and cultural benefits as the foremost reason to support this bill, I also would not underestimate the value playing up our colonial heritage could have to the Tourist Industry. On the one hand this could possibly convert to additional revenue for the state. More importantly, though, we would be embracing what I regard as our obligation to the country at large to preserve our colonial and revolutionary heritage for all the citizens of the U.S.

A free and prosperous country, with unprecedented opportunity for the average person, providing inspiration to millions around the world, literally began right here in our own backyards in Connecticut. We should know it, celebrate it, and cherish it. Honoring the great patriot Thomas Paine is a good place to begin.

Thank you again for your consideration.

Please feel free to contact me during the day at (860) 529-6855 if you have any questions or if you need additional information.